POPULAR CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE IN THE VICTORIAN CITY

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Introduction
Social history, cultural studies and the cad

It gives me great pleasure (as the music-hall chairman would have said) to introduce this collection of essays. Written over some twenty years they represent an enthusiastic if occasionally bemused journey along the shifting frontiers of social history; sometimes, it pleases me to think, in touch with the vanguard, at other times mopping up or consolidating with the second wave. Metaphors of the journey and a frontier landscape come readily to someone who has spent his career in geographical isolation on the Canadian prairies, those of skirmish and embattlement are appropriate for anyone traversing the contested terrain of British social history. To give more specific context to this collection and its author I begin with a brief overview of this terrain, a familiar enough story to many, but one that bears retelling from a personal perspective.

Social history, we are now advised, is in crisis, a chronic state of affairs compared to the heady days of the 1960s when I first enlisted.[1] Having shed its previous largely inferior status as a merely residual category, social history was then confidently addressing a new and more demanding agenda, together with a new and more demanding methodology. Hitherto neglected but significant groups, notably working people, were to be the proper subjects of full historical recovery, an exercise facilitated by closer engagement with the other social sciences. An earnest native empiricism was to be leavened with interdisciplinary insights and directed at the great swathe of historical experience ignored by establishment history with its narrow formal emphasis on politics and economics. Prominent in the new expeditionary corps of seekers of 'the social' was a cadre from the New Left inspired by the youngish Old Bustard, E. P. Thompson. The project was a radical challenge to orthodoxy with a totalising vision of how a new social history could grasp the workings of a whole society.

An important concern in this redefined social history was culture. This too was a redefined category expanded beyond the elitist confines of 'the best that has been thought and said' to embrace the ordinary and the popular. It was from this more anthropological perspective that Raymond Williams as literary critic urged the study of culture as 'a whole way of life' in terms of 'its structures of thought and feeling'. Both Williams and Thompson invested culture and its human subjects with a significant measure of power or agency, limited but by no means superseded by the economic or material constraints of society and its dominant class. This new cultural materialism encouraged historians to reconstruct popular or working-class culture as a vital force in the making of class identity and its political expression, a process most directly understood by connecting with the lived experience of its participants. Williams and Thompson were also inspirational figures in the formation of the complementary new field of cultural studies. A pioneer institution, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, was founded by another literary scholar, Richard Hoggart, whose sympathetic readings of working-class culture were also important for social historians. Insistently interdisciplinary, cultural studies in general gave critical priority to the popular culture of the day and became more aggressively theorised and political. For those on the left, culture was the pursuit of the political by other means.[2]

Cultural studies in the seventies became a major conduit for continental theory in the form of various 'structuralisms' that generated intense debate on the left and soon impinged on mainstream academia. The structures discernible to writers like Althusser and Foucault were more insidious and oppressive than those of Williams' earlier rather hazy humanist 'structures of feeling'. The first and ultimate structure was language, a predetermined force shaped by the dominant ideology and 'always, already' there. 'Language speaks us' – rather than the other way round – was the most forbidding proposition of the new theory. Other work on the primacy of language contributed to the so-called 'linguistic turn' which had a strong impact on conceptions of culture. Thus culture was further redefined as signifying practice, such that all its phenomena could now be read on the model of language as so many coded texts constructed from a repertoire of signs in particular structures of meanings. These structures could also take the form of discourse or a deployment of language identified by Foucault as an expert 'knowledge' that defined the power of special interest groups. Barthes demonstrated how the linguistic or semiotic model of culture could be extended

beyond the written and the verbal to decode the meaning of a wrestling match or steak and chips.

At the same time as the structuralist incursion, in tandem yet in conflict, came the eruption of critical feminism. In social history as elsewhere, more or less comfortably angry young men were assailed by much angrier women protesting against the languages and practices that had constructed them as subordinates in the academy as throughout history. The voices and vocabularies of vanguard scholarship continued in ferment – 'Keep it complex!' was one slogan from Birmingham. By the eighties Derrida and other literary-cum-psychological theorists of both genders were being saluted (or reviled) as 'post-structuralists' engaged in the yet more challenging practice of 'deconstruction'. The very concept of structure was attacked as too rigidly ordered to comprehend the endless fluidity of all signs and meanings. If all the world was now a text, it was a text without a centre. Another radical critical mode was that of post-colonialism which questioned ethnic and national identities and emphasised the otherness of post-imperial peoples. The fragmentation of meaning and the blurring of categories emphasised by the post structuralists is now taken to be typical of our present day 'post-modern' world such that the two terms are becoming interchangeable. Indeed, all the theories and developments outlined above – the discovery of culture, the linguistic turn, the brawling clutch of structuralisms, critical feminism – are likely to be badged indiscriminately as post-modernism.

Social historians' engagement with the new learning has been contentious and incomplete. Thompson, who had opened up the study of culture and alerted historians to the significance of language in his own distinctive manner, vigorously resisted continental theory. There were heated confrontations between those like himself, the 'culturalists', who read culture as an oppositional medium, and structuralists who took a bleaker, more determinist view. Gramsci's theories found considerable favour, since his model of hegemony posited an uneasy and recomposing process of cultural articulation in which the dynamics of resistance and domination were in continual negotiation. By the early eighties, Stedman Jones, one of the most prominent of post-Thompsonian historians in nineteenth-century British studies, was urging a fuller engagement with language as the beginning of the social chain, exemplified in his reconsideration of class in discursive rather than sociological terms.[3]

More recently Patrick Joyce has taken up the van with his promotion of a new post-modern social history. Struggling like a latterday Laocoon to divest himself of the received wisdom on class and class consciousness,

he has argued for the existence of other powerful collective social identities discernible in the several populist discourses that constructed meanings in the lives of nineteenth-century working people. In a further restless questioning of social history practice Joyce has moved on to deconstruct collective identities through an investigation of subjectivity, or the making of the individual self whose identity is mutually determined in interaction with 'the social' or the collectivity of selves. For Joyce, identity, individual and collective, is primarily a cultural construct constituted by language as deployed in symbolic narratives, of which class is only one among the many told by and to ourselves. Storied language rather than the material 'facts' of social being is what structures experience. This experience is reconceived more circumspectly as another form of representation rather than the voice of an authentic reality. The determinist note is redeemed by an insistence on the creative act of language which can enable the historical actor – and ourselves – to remake meaning. If language is a prison, as some maintain, we can nonetheless flex the bars – or change prisons. Thus agency lives, though with difficulty. The message of post-modernist thought, according to Joyce, 'is immensely liberating, but immensely troubling'.[4]

Within the profession there are many who are neither liberated, threatened, nor likely to think in these terms, as the post-modern intrusion is met with either disdain or indifference. History has in general been among the more conservative disciplines in its response to radical new thinking, and social history in Britain, for all it was born in dissent, has long since established its own comfortable protocols, not that very different from previous practice.[5] It attends to neglected areas, it tries to make connections and realise a sense of the whole; but it is still stolidly empirical, minimally reflexive, wary of theorising, and only timidly engaged with other disciplines. Problems of epistemology scarcely intrude. Historians, it is maintained, have always approached texts with scepticism, are well-schooled in close reading, and have always been alert to sub-texts or reading between the lines. They may not be as sublimely confident as Lord Acton of resolving all historical questions, but they know their job and they get on with it in largely unproblematical fact-rich production. They might add that much of the language of the new linguistically alert scholarship is impenetrable, a mix of the abstruse and the banal. At one end of the scale reified categories like 'the social' and 'the popular' march numbingly across the page, while at the other end particularist studies become so involuted in the mining of meaning that they disappear up their own text.

Yet what amounts to a new politics of knowledge is hardly likely to go away, not least in its critique of the issue that has dominated the agenda of modern social history in Britain – the social and material reality of class. Sapped by gender and race, class now seems about to collapse into mere difference, a master (*sic*) category on its last legs. Social identity, we are now told, starts with the self, a multiple subject constructed by language, culture and the symbolic system, a self for whom class may be one narrative thread among many, for whom work and material existence may be less significant than consumption and life style. Class is an imagined community competing with other collective identities for the allegiance of an overdetermined subject.[6]

Class is a strong theme in many of the essays collected here, overstated no doubt in the earlier ones, but still a plausible enough proposition where its operations are situated in specific positions and exchanges among social actors. If class is largely an imagined or invented phenomenon then it must still be imagined or invented out of some thing or things which include material being or experience, however represented. In the later essays I have taken more account of gender and recomposing fractional identities in the crowd, but the mark of class sticks like a burr in nineteenth-century society and remains among the more potent vectors of difference, however indeterminate or relativised. Even so, the reconception of class as an imaginary or discursive construct is richly suggestive, not least when applied to historians as well as history.

Social history since the sixties, I would argue, has been preoccupied with class because it is itself the product of class. The project recruited heavily from the first generations of beneficiaries of the 1944 Education Act, for whom a university education and the prospect of university or polytechnic employment was unprecedented in the experience of their (pardon me) class. Uneasily and incompletely embourgeoised they took up social history and its privileging of the working class from a mix of retrospective political commitment, class guilt, and various other insecurities – social, masculine and professional. Thompson's writings offered an epic model whose many replications in tone provided a purposive and moralised narrative for lesser class crusaders. In pursuit of class truths, social history became a comradely endeavour; gentlemanly initials (preferably three) were superseded by so many Geoffs and Daves. Either lacking or suspicious of established forms of cultural capital, the lumpenpolytechnic, as it was unkindly badged, found its own voice. Stirring and fruitful though it was, this fundamentally redemptive exer-

cise inevitably overloaded the class reading of history. If social history is now in crisis, it is a mid-life crisis among a generation of petit bourgeois males for whom an explanation, a vindication of self through the surrogate and collective identity of class has been ambushed by gender, confounded by Thatcher, and sapped by a new intellectual scepticism. The search for the true self turns inward, displaced into a new history and a new language, its personal imperatives still mostly under wraps. The fall of class is a fall from class, though nostalgia for the old categories still shows and old insecurities still surface – one champion of the new learning confides wryly that he feels more secondary modern than post-modern.

This collection is informed by its own personal narrative, in uneasy dialogue with the larger generational story. Brought up in the 1950s in a respectable working-class family, I was converted into a petty bourgeois at grammar school. 'Bailey is a gentleman', wrote the headmaster in his letter of reference for Oxford, conferring both accolade and curse that have proved difficult to live down or up to. Intimidated yet entranced by Oxford's savoir faire I pursued the authentic self in two opposite directions at once. With no very sound credentials I played the unreconstructed prole – 'What a dull life', observed a Wykhamist, 'drinking beer, throwing darts and saying fuck.' At the same time I learned how to tie a bowtie and give plausible impersonations of the true bourgeois gentilhomme. I was, of course, no more than a vulgar pretender, a descendant of that despicable Victorian type, the cad, though as yet a cad without the courage of his (lack of) convictions. Drink eased the perplexities of the immature self, perplexities more than anger, for its disablements seemed a consequence of personal deficiency as much as of cultural dislocation. An uncertain revenge was exacted in small ways – a yobbish campaign to disestablish the college beagle pack, desultory vandalism, throwing up on an old Etonian. Temperamentally averse to formal politics and guilty for not having been truly oppressed, I assumed an heroic class alias in history, a safely distanced role reinforced by geography as I left England for Canada, less the organic intellectual than a petit bourgeois place seeker masquerading as academic flaneur.

Distance also gave me space to find my own voice in history and scholarship. In graduate study at the University of British Columbia, I moved away from the heavily inhabited terrains of work and politics to a personally more congenial field of experience, leisure (chapter 1, below). And I fell into bad company. There was indeed plenty of class conflict in Victorian leisure, but its working-class combatants often seemed to me

more wily and opportunist than Fabian respectables or the forthright ideologues of Thompsonian descent. Bill Banks (chapter 2) suggested the readiness with which working men could turn the tables on their betters by the calculated performance of different roles that exploited the fragmented milieu of big city life. On this model I recast stolid English workers as a shifty lot, 'playing the system and winning back small but relishable gains in a class war gone underground.'[7] There was of course a good deal of personal projection in this but in Canada (teaching at the University of Manitoba) I was also benefiting from the perspective of a more detached middle ground, alert to the echoes of neo-Marxist debates from the homeland while exposed to American urban sociology and symbolic interactionism from across the border. Thus I was discovering what in Gramscian terms was a war of position rather than a war of movement by borrowing from Goffman to reconstruct the micro-politics of personal encounter, mediating between theories of class consciousness and the situational specifics of a more mobile modern consciousness. This early application of behavioural models of modernity (anticipating today's fashionable interest by nearly twenty years) did however put me at odds with the orthodoxies of the new social history in Britain for whom transatlantic sociology was then highly suspect, its liberal norms and language of 'modernisation' derided as another form of American imperialism. Bill Banks was turned down by the newest British journal in the field, whose pinched response belied its public call for enterprising scholarship; he was warmly welcomed in North America.

Looking back now it is plain that not only was Bill Banks the first of a sequence of cultural anti-heroes (and alter egos) but that he and they are complicit with another anti-hero, the modern city, though this too was to depart from the accepted perceptions of British historians. Homegrown social history still represents the rapidly expanding nineteenth-century city as proving ground for the native popular genius in maintaining community in a seeming social wasteland.[8] While there is undoubtedly evidence for this, it neglects the extensive dislocations of urban life as part of the more general onset of modernity where this is understood not only as the rationalising agenda of government and industry but as a fluid behavioural field and particular quality of experience. By this reading (as much continental European as transatlantic) the security of the putative 'urban village' dissolves into what Judith Walkowitz, the American historian of 1880s London, calls 'a cityscape of strangers and secrets'. This is the city as heterotopia, where cads of both

sexes can flourish, a world bristling with others that generates both opportunity and anxiety.[9]

There were certainly other less than sterling chaps exploiting the modern city and its new sites as a stage on which to play out bravura presentations of self, notably the impressively crapulous cartoon marauder Ally Sloper (chapter 3) and the first music-hall superstar, George Leybourne as Champagne Charlie (chapter 5). This work was increasingly influenced by a burgeoning interpretive literature in cultural studies and what amounted to a new cultural history with a particular investment in anthropology and the study of mentalities (chapter 4). I was encouraged by the eclectic enthusiasms of Raphael Samuel and History Workshop and was excited by the sophisticated primers published by the Open University to accompany its course in popular culture OU 203. From these and other sources I learned more about the multiple meanings of popular forms and everyday life, how to take apart the taken for granted, the significance of style and surface, processes of appropriation and exchange between cultural fractions, the reach of power and ideology, the function of discourse and interpellation – and modern subjectivity. Thus I was further initiated into 'theory', though this is being rather pretentious since it was a matter of fitful and oblique engagement rather than full frontal embrace. How much time and intellectual energy should be invested in a frequently, often literally alien literature in competition with the historian's hallowed duty to his sources? Direct invocation of new gods was tentative, witness an early allusion to Barthes (chapter 5) revealing my own facetious English disdain for extravagant 'foreign' ideas.

In the same piece I was still trying to reconcile my tricksters and anti-heroes with conventional categories as I strove to prove Leybourne's Champagne Charlie 'authentically' working-class, a conclusion at odds with the hybrid persona I had just been deconstructing. For all Leybourne's egregious appropriations of the apparatus of the gentleman (what had his headmaster said to him?) I was less confident in an unequivocally oppositional reading of music hall and the agency of its actors and audiences. As a laboratory of style whose patrons went there to learn how to conduct themselves as competent moderns, music hall validated the extended metaphor of the city as theatre; in the audience as well as on stage its social actors assumed and switched roles in the psychic and performative traffic of alternative identities – a kind of cultural cross-dressing. While such improvisations offered sometimes critical alternatives to ascribed social roles they suggested too the anxie-

ties and ambiguities that undercut the performance of identity. The 'knowingness' that informed music-hall humour (chapter 6) offered a language of competence that might give a worldly gloss to the (re)presentation of self and subvert official prescriptions of respectability, yet its confident tropes could also be unstable and self-deceiving. While appropriately dramatic, the sociological model of role-playing used in reading Bill Banks now seems too tidy in its functionalist assumptions of an inherent equilibrium and a singular core self with which all role performances are reconcilable. As modern subjects the social actors of this milieu are better understood as the transient tenants of various and competing subject positions, each a multiple-self unevenly defined in collusive antithesis with the dominant cultural order.

Enter gender and sexuality, or 'Champagne Charlie Meets the Barmaid'. Though much more disturbing elements in the formation of individual and collective identities, these factors had been marginalised or ignored in social history while earnest blokes like myself worried away at class. Feminist scholarship provoked sustained attention to the differences of gender, turning the tables on the male as the more problematical other. The study of the barmaid (chapter 7) tackles the question of gendered identities in popular culture, demonstrating with the aid of visual texts how the spatial and visual dynamics of the modernised Victorian pub were so managed to create a new mode of profitable yet licit sexuality that I term 'parasexuality'. If this was manifestly a male positioning of the woman it also reveals the male hunger for emotional recognition from the woman that new capitalist regimes of pleasure both served and frustrated. These structures of stimulation and containment have a particular personal resonance to a survivor of a 1950s adolescence who is still working to understand and expunge strongly residual Victorian sexual norms. For me, the firm injunction that 'Nice girls don't' (though barmaids might) always carried the corollary that 'Nice boys shouldn't', setting up a powerful internal struggle between the prig and the cad. Similar tensions informed the brokered sexuality that underlay the otherwise sanitised narratives of musical comedy (chapter 8), a richly suggestive new middlebrow genre of the 1890s with ambiguous representations of the woman as 'girl' – the girl who was 'naughty but nice'.

More than one of the pieces in this collection registers in passing a persistent but mostly unexamined property and, indeed, resource of popular culture – noise. One should not have to listen too hard to recognise that noise was not merely incidental but central to the pleasure or displeasure of contemporaries, to whom it also served as a

metaphor for the modern city in all its pullulating density. The concluding chapter attempts to open up the study of the cultural phenomenon of sound with a brief history of (Victorian) noise. While at one level this offers an entirely proper corrective to historians for overprivileging seeing and looking to the neglect of hearing and listening, it might also be heard as a parting shot at the pious keepers of the professional tone who still patrol British academic life. Historians as well as history should be noisier.

'Know thyself' is an ancient injunction with which most of us would concur, while adding the hasty rider 'but keep it to thyself'. Objective knowledge and professional good manners demand the erasure of any explicit self. Yet the selves are surfacing. For feminists the often painful release of the personal has been a crucial exercise in staking out identity and recovering the history of an oppressed sex. But for men also, however privileged in gender power, there is a need to reconcile or oppose the troubled self and its histories with received accounts and their approved historical others. There is precedent too in the important function of autobiography for Thompson and other male 'founders' of cultural studies. The prospect of a rush of middle-aged scholarly flashers is unsettling, but as social history seeks to conflate the social and the psychic and reconstruct collectivities through a fuller understanding of the subject, some form of self-witnessing seems to be a necessary instruction and a likely resource for its practitioners.[10]

The pieces that follow appear mostly in their original published form. Though each can be read separately, some minor additions have been made to assist continuity plus some small changes from the original sequence of production to provide greater thematic coherence. References have been updated. Overall, the collection moves from an initial concern with the more formal perceptions and prescriptions attending the formation of the Victorians' new leisure world to questions of popular practice and meaning.

Popular culture is conceived of here as a sprawling hybrid, a generically eclectic ensemble or repertoire of texts, sites and practices that constitute a widely shared social and symbolic resource. In the nineteenth century it is increasingly colonised by emergent culture industries, a rogue branch of liberal capitalism whose operations may at one and the same time match or surpass the Fordist or Taylorist aspirations of manufacturing industry, while retaining a populist address akin to the pseudo-gemeinschaft of the publican and the prostitute. These industries – the new pub, the music hall, the theatre, and the popular press –

compete with each other, territorially and rhetorically, as also with the state and other respectable fractions of the social order. The constituency for popular culture fluctuates and recomposes; while not coterminous with any single class it is broadly democratic, answering both to the ritual promptings of an indigenous custom, old and newly forged, and the slicker formulations of mass or middlebrow commercial confection. It generates its own initiatives while readily appropriating from other sources, including 'high' or elite culture. Its materials are put to specific and selective use by its consumers, who variously embrace, modify or resist its meanings under the particular conditions and relationships of its reception.

The culture of working people at the core of popular culture has, largely on the sample of the industrial town or proletarian ghetto, been characterised as 'a culture of control', exercising, in Hoggart's words, 'a certain gripping wholeness'. But there were clearly other more dynamic dimensions to popular experience, typified by De Certeau's compelling metaphor of modern life as lived out in 'the ciphered river of the streets', to which we should add other urban sites and situations in which the membrane of custom and community dissolves and meanings are much less certainly known.[11] From an interactive perspective that allows for a more volatile mix of players, real and imaginary, than those of the self-enclosed working-class neighbourhood, nineteenth-century popular culture can be understood as a performance culture no less than those of early modern or 'traditional' societies that have more readily qualified for the term among historians and cultural anthropologists. Compared to the latter's more formally ritualised and communal occasions, its social dramas are, however, more often situational, improvisatory and individualised. This is a culture that trades in carnivalesque echoes of excess and inversion, grand utopian conceits of a permanent democracy of pleasure and the emotionalised myths of melodrama in which the good and the true prevail. But in less extravagant or formalised terms it also deals extensively in the tactics of the diurnal, in the micro-politics and implicit knowledges of everyday life, their rehearsal and critique. Its meanings, like its satisfactions, are ambiguous and far from always benign, mixing the reactionary and conservative with the potentially subversive.

Attention to language and the imaginary offers one route to a fuller understanding of the dynamics of popular culture and their implications for politics and power in the broader sense, though this exercise needs that careful grounding in the specific and the contextual – rigour

without rigor mortis – which is still the necessary and distinctive contribution of the historian. This is uncharacteristically earnest talk from a cad, but in its crisis social history has become exciting again, suggesting a new history from the inside as well as from below, with the prospect of a more intimate understanding of its actors, and of ourselves.